

## **The Great Debate at Ottawa**

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In the past, elections have always been an immense part of everyday life. In 1858, elections were important both to the state, and to the candidates, fueling their desire to be victorious. In 1858, two candidates decided on seven debates for a U. S. Senate seat, all over Illinois. These two candidates were Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, two people from deep inside the political circle. Their debates decided who the people chose to represent their state. Furthermore, the issues that they raised were controversial, to say the least. From slavery to hidden plots to shame some and benefit others, the debates raised points that many never expected to hear. Overall, the state was greatly affected as opinions on slavery changed and people began to change their minds about many other issues. As a result of the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Ottawa, many racial issues facing Illinois were raised, and people's view on slavery changed, which helped lay the foundation for the Civil War.

These debates had a profound effect on life as it is today, but there was a considerable background that fueled these debates. To begin, both of these men had spent most of their lives in Illinois to help improve the state. Also, the two candidates had to arrange for travel. In the beginning, Lincoln suggested that the duo travel together for 100 days, debating all over the state. But Douglas objected, declaring that the scheme would be too trying. In the end, they decided instead on seven debates, taking place in seven of the nine congressional districts throughout the state. Finally, Lincoln was

somewhat unsure of the topic of slavery given the fact that it was not something he had publicly debated before.

Throughout the campaigns and the debates, the press played a large part by being very public about the candidates and their lives. Therefore, the publicity of the campaign played a large part in the final outcome. First, the support for the candidates from many people came from articles put into newspapers and other places. Douglas was openly supported by the Republicans. Furthermore, the New York *Tribune* urged the Illinois Republicans to side with Douglas over the debate, something that they were already doing, unbeknownst to the newspaper at the time of publication. Additionally, Lincoln was endorsed by ninety-five state officials. Issues that they raised that contributed to the overall publicity were the political rights and responsibilities they assumed. One issue was raised by Lincoln, stating that slavery clearly violated the Declaration of Independence.

Easily one of the most important aspects, and the most obvious would have to be politics. Politics shaped the way Illinois functioned as a state, and they shaped the final outcome of the debate. The country's instability, the timing, the context of the debate, and the issue of slavery all played a major part in the final outcome. Within the debate, Douglas believed that the issue of slavery, and the decisions with it, should stay at a local level. The points should be decided by the local government; the end result should affect the wishes of the people, he believed. It has also been said to have had the greatest impact of all the debates that had ever taken place in Illinois.

As it was previously stated, the first of the seven debates took place in Ottawa on August 21, 1858. It began with Douglas delivering a one-hour long opening speech,

where he stated the points in which he believed. After Douglas' speech, Lincoln gave his opening speech, and then Douglas delivered his rebuttal, which led into half hour answers to finish out the debate. Some of the points raised had great impacts. At one point during the debate, Douglas asked Lincoln about whether or not Lincoln agreed on slavery's abolition in certain areas. Lincoln agreed, claiming that slavery violated the Declaration of Independence. When it was Douglas' turn to debate, he raised no new points after Lincoln's speech, leading some to doubt him.

With every excellent debate, there will always come some controversy, and this debate was no exception. First, the current population of Illinois brought great controversy. There were rifts created with other states, and some were bold enough to say that Illinois was at war with the surrounding states. Also, Lincoln had an associate in law named Trumbull. In the debate, Douglas claimed that Lincoln and Trumbull had a secret plot to shame Illinois as a whole by twisting the country's debt. Not only would the state be shamed, but the two men would supposedly get into Congress. There was never any concrete proof of any plan like this, and Lincoln vehemently denied that any of Douglas' words were true.

As a result of the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Ottawa, many racial issues facing Illinois were raised, and people's view on slavery changed, which laid the foundation for the Civil War. Both Douglas and Lincoln worked hard throughout the entire debate to make their points known, influencing the minds of Illinois residents as they went. The issues they raised are still affecting Illinois and the surrounding states today, which is something both candidates were hoping to achieve. From stirring the political pot to smashing the basic fundamentals of slavery that had entranced the state

for so long, they changed the state for the better. They shaped how Illinois functions today, and how slavery is viewed. Elections today are high fueled, high intensity affairs, something that Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln could both relate to in their battle for power. [From George R. Farnum and Harry F. Lake, *The Great Debate*; Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, "Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *The Reader's Companion to American History* Dec. 1, 1991; William E. Foote, "The Ottawa Debate." *The Daily Pantagraph* Aug. 24, 1858; Blaine Brooks Gernon, *Lincoln in the Political Circus*; Edith Mavis and Ted Mavis, "Touring Illinois: The Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *Illinois Magazine* Aug./Sep. 1978; Ralph G. Newman, *Lincoln for the Ages*; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*; and Don C. Seitz, *Lincoln the Politician*.]